



JAIME EGUIGUREN

ART & ANTIQUES

Puno, Viceroyalty of Peru
circa 1700–1735

Altar Frontal Plates

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Repoussé, chased and punch-decorated silver

58.5 × 58.5 cm (central plate); 57.5 × 58.5 cm; 58.5 × 58.5 cm (lateral plates)

Weight: 4,310 g (central plate); and 3,500 g and 3,610 g (lateral plates)

Provenance: Private collection

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Dr. Cristina Esteras Martín

These three plates were part of the center of an altar frontal and have a quadrangular format. Two are identical to each other and the third differs. The principal one features at the center a sort of oblong cartouche crowned by a small escutcheon with a mirror in the center and a pair of grape clusters at the sides; within it is represented the image of the Lamb of God (*Agnus Dei*) bearing the banner and lying upon the Book of the Seven Seals,¹ with five bleeding wounds (in the lower part) that allude to the emblem of the Franciscan Order.

In the corners of the upper area appear two cornucopias passing through the jaws of two hybrid masks, while the composition is closed at the lower part by a pair of birds with pronounced long beaks (herons) resting upon scrolls formed by flat ribbons ending in counter-curves with foliage. Additionally, trapped within the ornament of the central zone emerge two confronting female figurines referring to the image of sirens with foliated coiled tails. The surface of the background free of motifs appears punch-decorated, and the composition is treated with “*horror vacui*,” but according to a criterion of symmetry, repoussé always being used to boldly enhance each of the elements. Two convex moldings with engraved leaves close the composition at the upper and lower parts of the plate.

In the other pair of plates the ornament changes, although some of the represented motifs imitate analogous figurations (even if they are different icons), and regarding their ornamental composition the orientation of the motifs varies, since those of the left plate face toward the right and those of the right plate turn toward the left, seeking on each occasion to visually unite with the central plate. The central figure is a bird with extended wings which, because of its bodily volume, seems to refer to a dove;² a flat ribbon passes through the mouths of two mascarons serving as a horizontal axis distributing the ornament into two planes where scrolling cartouches, fruits, pomegranate flowers, a heron and perhaps another in the upper and lower left corners are arranged, together with a feline head and a grotesque head in the other two corners. On this occasion, three convex moldings delimit the plates along their upper, lateral and lower sides, lacking the molding on the right and left sides because precisely along this edge they were joined to the central plate in order to integrate all of them forming a single structure. Regarding execution, the same technical and compositional treatment is repeated.

But the decorative language selected goes beyond merely seeking ornamentation for the pieces,³ since the principal motifs (Mystical Lamb, grape clusters, wheat ears, herons and dove) allow us to reveal the symbolism of these icons, thus explaining that the plates were dedicated to the Sacrament of the Eucharist in which the Last Supper is commemorated, where bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. As for the presence of five wounds beneath the Lamb — the central one larger — they are identified with the “wounds of the stigmatization” of Saint Francis of Assisi that were chosen as the coat-of-arms of the Order founded by him,⁴ therefore their presence in the plates would support that they come from a Franciscan temple.

1 This Book is a mystical and symbolic book often associated with Christian and apocalyptic tradition. Its origin is deeply rooted in the Book of Revelation, the last book of the New Testament, attributed to the Apostle Saint John. The seven seals of God in the Book of Revelation represent Christ's title of ownership over creation.

2 A similar bird appears in the Peruvian frontal from Sicuani (photographically reproduced in Busto Duthurburu, José Antonio del: *La platería en el Perú. Dos mil años de arte e historia*. Colección Enrico Poli. Lima, MCMXCVI, fig. 210).

3 It was customary for the escutcheon of the central plate to be dedicated to an invocation, generally that of the titular of the church: the Virgin of Candelaria (Calamarca), the Holy Family (Jesús y María in Cuzco and Carabuco), the MAR (Acomayo, Pomata and Puno), the IHS (Ayavi and Jesús de Machaca), the Mystical Lamb (Quiquijana, Azángaro, Pupuja and Chucuito), the Monstrance (Oropesa, Urcos, Checacupe and San Pedro, Juli), Chalice with the Sacred Host (Urquillos), the Papal Tiara (Tiahuanaco), or even a heraldic coat of arms (Huario and Sicuani).

4 They refer to the five wounds of the Passion of Christ (side, hands and feet) that the Franciscan saint received in his own body as a sign of identification with Jesus.

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The frontal (*antependium*)⁵ was one of the most important elements that adorned the altar, both because of its dimensions and its intrinsic and artistic value, and consisted of mounting several silver plates nailed onto a wooden core (framework) forming and decorating a panel that covered in its entirety the front part of the table where the priest officiated the Mass. Its structure could vary, but from Cuzco to Potosí the usual practice was to give them a design in which thick silver plates were distributed in the form of an inverted U, by placing a narrow upper band (frontalera) and two vertical ones at the sides (caídas), thus framing those that formed the central body; and it is in this space where, originally, our three plates would have been located.

Although none of the three plates bears the marks that were mandatory for silver works⁶ and which might have guided us regarding their place of origin, their ornamental characteristics allow us to assign them an indicative provenance. The profuse decorative repertoire and compositional structure previously mentioned — cornucopias, scrolling ribbons, escutcheons, hybrid mascarons, monstrous heads and sirens with coiled tails — originate in prints, book frontispieces and European Mannerist engravings, but now interpreted according to Andean Baroque taste. Undoubtedly this was the usual thematic repertoire used in silversmith workshops of the central Andes of the Viceroyalty of Peru and very specifically in the city of Cuzco and its area of influence, extended along the Royal Road (Inca Road) toward Puno, reaching Lake Titicaca and even extending to the workshops of La Paz.

And it was during the government of Bishop Don Manuel de Mollinedo y Angulo (1673–1699) when Cuzco silversmithing reached its golden age and the moment in which the frontals financed by this prelate typified a model of geometric structure of scrollwork and pseudo-Mannerist ornaments,⁷ codified in the examples made for the Cuzco churches of Belén (1696), San Cristóbal (currently in the cathedral museum), San Sebastián and that of the chapel of “La Linda” (in this same church), as well as that of the parish of the town of San Jerónimo el Real (1702).⁸ This typology survived beyond this stage, continuing even beyond the middle decades of the eighteenth century.

But by comparing our plates with other known⁹ and unpublished frontals,¹⁰ they can be related to that of the high altar of the church of Jesús y María (annexed to the cathedral of Cuzco) made around 1735,¹¹ but above all with other frontals located in several towns situated along the Royal Road (Quiquijana, Checacupe (Fig. 1), Sicuani or Ayaviri (Fig. 2) and in the Lake area: that of the Peruvian cathedral of Puno (work by Eugenio de Chávez in 1722) and that of the Sanctuary of Carabuco (Fig. 3) (this one signed by Eugenio de Chávez in 1740),¹² as well as with the frontals of the temples of

5 Decorative structure of Christian churches. They were made of embroidered silk, painted wood, leather (guadamecil or cordobán), enameled copper, or silver. However, it was in the latter that they truly acquired full development in Hispano-American silversmithing, especially in the Viceroyalties where silver mines were abundant, such as in New Spain (Mexico) and Peru.

6 It was common practice to avoid hallmarking silverwork in South America in order to evade the payment of fiscal taxes.

7 During his tenure, no fewer than twenty frontals and other liturgical pieces were produced to meet the needs of the many churches built following the earthquake of 1650 (Esquivel y Navia: *Noticias cronológicas de la gran ciudad del Cuzco*, Vol. II, Lima, 1980, p. 174).

8 Signed and dated by the silversmith Luis de Lezana. It was studied and brought to scholarly attention by Esteras Martín, Cristina, in “Aportaciones a la historia de la platería cuzqueña en la segunda mitad del siglo XVII,” *Anuario de Estudios Americanos*, vol. XXXVII (1980), pp. 709–740, and in “Luis de Lezana, platero del Cuzco (1665–1713),” *Boletín del Museo e Instituto Camón Aznar*, no. XLVIII–IL (1992), pp. 31–60.

9 For example, with the one exhibited in Madrid in 1997 belonging to a private collection (Esteras Martín, Cristina: *Platería del Perú Virreinal. 1535–1825*. Madrid–Lima, Grupo BBV y Banco Continental, 1997, no. 22, pp. 124–125).

10 They are preserved in our photographic archive compiled during the research campaigns we carried out in Peru between 1979 and 1985.

11 Studied by Esteras Martín, Cristina: “Aculturación and Innovation in Peruvian Viceregal Silverwork,” *The Colonial Andes Tapestries and Silverwork, 1530–1830*, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2004, no. 92, pp. 280–282.

12 They are studied and reproduced photographically by Esteras Martín, Cristina: “Noticias acerca de la platería

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the church of Jesús de Machaca and of Tiahuanaco (in Bolivia).¹³ All four were certainly made in the silversmith workshops of the city of Puno (Peru), very active from the final years of the seventeenth century until covering the first third of the eighteenth century.

These coincidences lead us to tentatively catalogue the three plates within the Puno silversmith workshops located on the shores of Lake Titicaca and to establish their chronology within the first third of the eighteenth century, since although their ornamental language derives from the previous century, the manner of enhancing the motifs and compacting them suggests a more advanced date within the full Baroque.

The three plates stand out for their exceptional technical quality, achieving brilliant plasticity through the handling of motifs and their compositional ordering. Despite the ornament almost completely occupying the surface, the artisan knew very well how to highlight volume by precisely drawing the motifs that were prioritized not only through repoussé but also by filtering the background of the plate with punch decoration, thus achieving a luminous contrast that allowed them to stand out over a background scarcely free of ornament. Furthermore, these three pieces also stand out for their artistic value, once again confirming the splendid work developed by silversmiths of the Peruvian altiplano (Peru and Bolivia) during this stage of the viceregal Baroque, largely thanks to the immense abundance of silver wealth in the Collao region¹⁴, which allowed the manufacture of pieces of extraordinary weight, adding great intrinsic value to silver objects, as occurs in this case.



Fig. 1 Altar frontal (detail), first half of the 18th century, Checacupe, Cuzco, Peru. Photograph by Cristina Esteras Martín.



Fig. 2 Altar frontal (detail), Ayaviri, Puno, Peru, first half of the 18th century. Photograph by Cristina Esteras Martín.



Fig. 3 Eugenio de Chávez, 1722, altar frontal (detail), Church of San Miguel de Carabuco, La Paz, Bolivia. Photograph by Cristina Esteras Martín.

puneña: los frontales de la catedral de Puno y de la iglesia de Carabuco," *Actas de las I Jornadas de Arte organized by Instituto "Diego Velázquez," Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas*. Madrid, 1982, pp. 209–216, figs. 1–7.

13 Mesa, José de and Gisbert, Teresa: "La platería monumental en la región del Lago Titicaca: El frontal," in *Historia y Cultura*, La Paz, no. 6 (1984), pp. 87–101.

14 Located around Lake Titicaca, with mining deposits as important as those of San Antonio de Esquilache and Laicacota in Puno; and those of Partía, Umpoco, and Pomasi in Lampa; Zacata in Juli; and Berenguela in La Paz.

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